

# #12

# RESISTANCE TO READING AND RESISTANCE TO THEORY. EPISODES IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERARY CRITICISM

**Miguel Dalmaroni**

*Universidad Nacional de La Plata - CONICET*

**Illustration** || Isaías Verdelejos

**Translation** || Fedora Copley

**Artículo** || Upon Request | Published: 01/2015

**License** || Creative Commons Attribution Published -Non commercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.



**Abstract** || The resistance to the theory of reading—the resistance to the need for thinking about literature in terms of event and experience—would be a variant of the “resistance to theory” (de Man). From 1990 to the present day, such a resistance has shown particular manifestations in Latin American and Argentine criticism and in “histories of reading.” In those contexts, a certain idea of “historicization” is used as a factualist, post-theoretical, or anti-theoretical manner of suppressing the critical issue of literature’s resistance to being reduced to its cultural aspect.

**Keywords** || Resistance to Theory | Reading | Latinoamericanism | Post-Theory

---

*En una ocasión, Adam Phillips comparó los efectos impredecibles de la lectura con el «trabajo del sueño» según Freud. Un tratamiento psicoanalítico, señaló Phillips, es como leer una poderosa obra de literatura, «un salto hacia una oscuridad indefinible. Nadie puede saber nunca de antemano el efecto que tendrá o, de hecho, no tendrá». [...] Phillips detalla: «Es como si, de un modo extraño, uno estuviera esperando a alguien pero no sabe quién es hasta que no aparece». Lo mismo sucede con un libro. Si el psicoanálisis es un diálogo con uno mismo en presencia de otro, la lectura es una conversación con otro en presencia de ese que creemos ser, que no sabemos todavía quién es, o en quién se convertirá gracias a lo que lee.*

Matías Serra Bradford (2014)

## 0. Introduction: Many historians, few theoreticians

One afternoon in November 2014, the Organizing Committee of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Literary Theory and Criticism “Orbis Tertius”, announced for June 2015, met in the Humanities Department of the city of La Plata in Argentina to propose names of special guests for the event. The conference was announced in memory of Susana Zanetti, the author of the *La dorada garra de la lectura. Lecturas y lectores de novela en América Latina* (2002), and the general topic of the call for papers was “Lectores y Lectura”. In order to consider the issue of the guest conference speakers, the organizers revised the text of the first call for papers of the conference, which had been approved by the scientific committee and published in July, with the purpose of thinking about well-known specialists based on two main orientations:

por una parte, la lectura y las subjetivaciones-desubjetivaciones que llamamos “lector” en términos de experiencia y acontecimiento —según recorridos de la teoría literaria, la filosofía y la propia literatura, que van de Derrida y de De Man a Miller, de Barthes a Badiou, de Proust y Virginia Woolf a Borges y María Moreno. Por otra parte, las investigaciones de las llamadas historias de la lectura y los lectores, que desde enfoques sociológicos, culturalistas o historiográficos interrogan el tema en tanto prácticas y sujetos socialmente constituidos y determinados; las firmas de Chartier, Darnton, Mollier, Petrucci, a la vez que las de Adolfo Prieto, Nora Catelli, Beatriz Sarlo, Susana Zanetti o Graciela Batticuore orientan buena parte de este campo de investigaciones, que permite abordar el problema de la historia de la edición y los mercados, la divergencia públicos/lectores, lectores/lectoras, lectores de prensa y lectores de libros; el problema de las representaciones literarias de la lectura como resto de experiencia o como práctica cultural, la lectura en la ficción, en el teatro y en la poesía. Estas dos orientaciones no excluyen, por supuesto, las posibles revisiones de otros clásicos de la crítica, la teoría literaria y la filosofía asociados con la semiótica, la estética de la recepción, la hermenéutica u otras tradiciones. (McKenzie, Eco, Febvre, Iser, Fish, Gadamer, Jauss, entre otros). (Zanetti, 2002)

In attempting to outline what seemed to be the coordinates of a field of study, the invitation provoked the emergence of what I would like to nominate (if one allows the oxymoron) as a clear sign: the organizers of the conference—all trained researchers—had connections, contacts

---

and very good information about specialists of the second orientation (the socio-historical) from universities in various countries in Latin America, the United States and Europe. For the first orientation (the theoretical-philosophical), in contrast, the organizers could barely think of a few names. A few questions arise: is “reading”, or what we imply when we say this word, resistant to the theory that interrogates it? Does Latin American criticism, for reasons that include the very same resistance, avoid the topic or deviate from it?

We set out here to explore, albeit in a preliminary way, what we will call resistance to the theory of the reading—resistance to the necessity of a thought that questions reading as an act, as an event and as an experience—; this resistance to the theory of the reading is a variant of the “resistance to theory” according to the classic essay by Paul de Man (1986). While it might not pertain to the problem, the initial horizon of these notes is Latin American and particularly Argentinian criticism, a field where it is possible to observe the appeal of a certain idea of “historicization” in diverse situations of resistance to reading.

## 1. Resistance to literature and the “post theory era” in Latin America

John Beverly, a member of the “Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios Subalternos”, who Javier Lasarte Valcárcel called “uno de los fundadores de la resistencia a la literatura” (2006: 5), published a book in 1993 simply titled *Against Literature*. In an essay from 2001, “Desorientaciones intelectuales”, included in a compilation of Lasarte Valcárcel published in Caracas, Vicente Lecuna (from the Universidad Central de Venezuela) kept returning to the figure of the “collapse” of criticism, and he declared the definitive decline of the “confianza en los poderes liberadores y detonantes de la literatura” and of “la crítica literaria” like “monoteísmo cultural” (Lecuna, 2001: 101-105). During the years between 1990 and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the most influential orientations of the Latin American academic debates consisted in resolving the “resistencia [del acontecimiento literatura] a la teoría” through a severe criticism of “literature” of an intensely moral register, politicalist, *radical*; to which was added the replacement of theory through a striking confidence in the exercise of a certain “historicization”, subjected almost exclusively to its own political self-vigilance. If previously it represented what many considered to be one of the libertarian possibilities of “la expresión americana”; and had been variously theorized as one of the extreme experiences of the unfastening or the “Outside” of Language or Order, now “literature” was seen as—or reduced to—one naturalized historical compartmentalization of the practice of writing, functional to capitalism, almost a mere cultural

---

device of the imperial, bourgeois, Eurocentric, white, masculine social domination; and if there was anything to name as “literature” beyond that historic device which up until now we knew as “literary theory”—and furthermore, the epistemological ideology upon which the idea of “theory” rested—could only fall from grace in the same way “literature” had, or, at least, remained under similar suspicion. More or less immediately, many went further: “literature” and “theory” had arrived at their end point, even as cultural exercises or activities of social subjects (other things were being created though they were still called “literature”), together with the end of a series of “essentializations” that had always accompanied literature and its theories: “text”, “author”, “work”, etc.

The boundaries of this cycle of Latin American criticism could be established (although others are possible) among *La ciudad letrada* de Ángel Rama (1984) and the book edited by Jean Franco in 2002 (*The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*), or, to bring us up to 2010, *Aquí América Latina* by Josefina Ludmer. Of course, we can only propose a selection that illustrates the possibility of following a less fragmentary path.

It is notable that the manual of literary theory most widely published and translated at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opens with an insistent warning about the aversions, complaints, suspicions and protests that literary theory provokes and, even more, about the “oblivion” and the “repression” it is subjected to. These two words with which Terry Eagleton ended the “Preface” of *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (2008 [1983]: xiv) in 1983 anticipated the two meanings that Paul de Man would apply in 1986 to “resistance to theory”: the reluctance, the reservations towards, and even the rejection (by critics, professors, readers) of literary theory; and at the same time the unyielding resistance to literature (and language) to be read, theorized, which is to say captured (*forgotten, repressed*) at some time—and for good—by a “grammar” able to express its “logic”. The psychoanalytic simile employed by Eagleton is inevitable when we reread De Man: if resistance is due to an incompatibility between desire and the word, between the event and the impossible intention of restraining it with a name given by Culture, there is always an unyielding residue of resistance, a remnant that the theoretical impulse can never reach but can only pursue; the ideologically disobedient, and the politically or, better, ethically foreign character to constraints of de Man’s main argument:

Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself this resistance. The loftier the aims and the better the methods of literary theory, the less possible it becomes. Yet literary theory is not in danger of going under; it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance. (de Man, 1986: 19)

---

But Eagleton found the way to *forget*, *repress* or transfigure his own rejection of the resistance of literature: in a manual of literary theory, he declares literature itself to be *nonexistent* and he proposed, in contrast, the predictable territory of “practices” and “discourses” (objects of an *existence* that, in contrast with “literature”, it would seem unnecessary to lay siege to). Such an invitation does not seem beyond certain recent political-*historiographical* tendencies of Latin American literary criticism, nor the somewhat hidden facticism that is associated with a persistent resistance to adopt theoretical orientations that are often linked to speculative exercises (philosophy, theory).

In the beginning of *La parole muette*, a 1998 book translated in Buenos Aires in 2009, Jacques Rancière noted that variant of the resistance to the unyielding resistance of literature—the oblivion of its resistance to theory—, and set out to debate it. Rancière persisted with an academically incorrect mystery: *what is literature*:

Il y a des questions que l'on n'ose plus poser. Un éminent théoricien de la littérature nous l'indiquait récemment: il faut ne pas craindre le ridicule pour intituler aujourd'hui un livre: "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" [...] Il vaut donc la peine de se demander quelles propriétés singulières affectent sa notion, jusqu'à faire paraître désespérée ou ridicule la recherche de son essence. (Rancière, 2005 [1998]: 5-6)

What Rancière argued against is none other than the postdisciplinary pretension according to which “resistance to theory” was an evil of a recent but dismissed age, during which a remnant of epistemological innocence could make it such that we would still give credit to the pretensions of theorization of literature and thus, naturally, we would resist them at the same time. In order to unfold his theory of literature, the first thing that the philosopher does, it seems, is to denaturalize that *negation* of the resistance to theory and its consequent oblivion. In the second book that he dedicates to the issue, *Politique de la littérature*, from 2007 (translated in Buenos Aires in 2011), Rancière includes an essay about Borges in whose final page he introduces one of his most effective critical-philosophical figurations and formulae to *define* “literature”; but, at the same time, it is a figuration of the written thought about literature, a *definition* of the resistance of literary theory, of the “constitutive dream” that impedes dissolving its dissolution: “La suppression de l'écart des mots et des choses est le rêve constitutif à l'ombre duquel se déploie le parcours interminable de l'intervalle qui les sépare” (Rancière, 2007: 164).

Within debates about the Latin American academic field since 1990, in contrast, a certain consensus has seemed to make headway: if approximately with the inclusion of deconstructionism in the syllabi of American academia, the theory reached its climax of institutional legitimization and saturated the styles of critical writing and even

---

student slang, for the same reason the era of “literary theory” seemed to enter into the final phase of a self-induced agony; in a turn that is not obligatory to read as a parody of a topic, literary theory had been realized, now it just had to be deconstructed (or, rather, it now had to dedicate itself to its own ceaseless deconstruction). Examined not in terms of thinking, but in historicist and political terms, literary theory or theory of art could only be observed as epistemological, discursive, ideological and educational devices with some sort of power, and even, along the same lines, as a prolonged and now deceased avatar of the “ciudad letrada” of the West. In the field of those so-called “posttheoretical”, “postdisciplinary”, “postcolonial” or “postoccidental” writings from the 90s, the work of the late of Angel Rama could go hand in hand with Eagleton’s book, whose 1988 Spanish translation by the Mexican publishing house Fondo de Cultura Económica appeared on the syllabi of literary theory courses of the continent for many years.

One of the facets of this prolonged and copious challenge to theory was to attack its commercial institutionalization. A critical review of Latin American studies in the United States which Andrés Avellaneda (University of Florida) started to write and exhibit around 2006 and published in 2008, recalled that at that time, among the results of the “creciente importancia de la teoría en la universidad norteamericana”—there was a paradoxical “girar de la teoría sobre sí misma”,—and “la pseudopolitización académica a que ésta ha dado lugar”, and these were the “rechazo de los conceptos de valor estético y de calidad literaria por su condición elitista”, and the questioning of the “concepto mismo de estudio literario” (Avellaneda, 2008: 203-204). Earlier, in March of 2003, Julio Ortega (Brown University and Universidad de los Andes in Mérida) began his article “Post-teoría y estudios transatlánticos” by citing a statement made by Ernesto Laclau in 1999—“we are living in a *post*-theoretical age”—and expressed a similar evaluation to that of Avellaneda about the anti- and post-theoretical effects of the university’s predominance within theory, a “theoretical hyper-interpretation” that offered an emphatic preference for porous and indeterminate objects of study, for particularly “fluid” “processes” which left behind such distinctions as “literature”. At the same time, Ortega counted the growth of political criticism against theory among the causes of its decline:

en torno a este fin de siglo, el predominio de los grandes modelos teóricos fue excedido por su misma conversión en sistema de autoridad. Pero este agotamiento no hubiese sido posible sin el intenso cuestionamiento de la voluntad de verdad que esos modelos ejercían desde su posición centralizadora; fueron derivando en moneda corriente, mero poder académico y novedad mediática [...] (Ortega, 2003: 109)

Additionally, they became associated—under the broad banner of *cultural studies*—with the pretensions of transparency and

---

communicability of the technologies of globalization (110). Just before or just after the year 2000, this questioning of the academic uses of theory based on its domestication as a university commodity (a protest that echoes Fredric Jameson's insistence against postmodernism and the "cultural turn") seems to have been expanded upon as part of a certain common thread in Latin American criticism, similar to the opening pages of the book about Raymond Williams published in São Paulo in 2001 by the Brazilian critic María Elisa Cevalco: "la crisis que atraviesan las humanidades", the center of which is the transformation of "literary criticism" in "studies of culture", for Cevalco, it is colored by "la lógica de la mercantilización" (Cevalco, 2003: 17, 20-21).

One panorama that was simultaneously, an update and a positioning, was the collection by Santiago Castro Gómez and Eduardo Mendieta published in Mexico in 1998 and it circulated around various websites under the title *Teorías sin disciplina (latinoamericanismo, poscolonialidad y globalización en debate)*. There, Castro Gómez (then professor of the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá) recalled that the critics in the "post" field (post-theoretical, post-occidental, subalternist) began from a position that was Western, europeanist and colonial-imperialist: "todas las categorías emancipadoras, aun las que ellos mismos utilizan, se encuentran ya 'manchadas' de metafísica" (Castro Gómez and Mendieta, 1998: 13). That anti-euro-centric perspective induced, of course, a series of tentative substitutions, of which we will mention two: in 1997, Walter Dignolo (who was then Professor of Latin American literature at Duke University) expressed the possibility of understanding political actions and the politics of communication and propaganda from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation as a "revolución teórica"; thus, Dignolo displaced the figure of the theoretician-critic or of the intellectual who is limited to observe, mark, and describe the *theoretical* revolutions that produce the practices of subaltern rebellion (Dignolo, 1997). Our second example: Professor Jorge Brioso (Carleton College) planned the themed issue of the ninth volume of the *Colorado Review of Hispanic Studies* (anticipated for the fall of 2011) with this purpose:

Hemos leído la literatura española y latinoamericana a lo Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Badiou, Rancière, Levinas, Benjamin, Heidegger y un largo etcétera pero raramente se intentó establecer un diálogo crítico entre nuestras literaturas y la tradición filosófica y de pensamiento que se produjo desde estas latitudes. Este dossier propone, para iniciar esta forma de diálogo, un acercamiento al ensayo filosófico español y latinoamericano más reciente y a la serie de categorías filosóficas que ha engendrado: ejemplaridad, intimidad, la cordura y los hábitos del corazón, etc. Dichas categorías proponen nuevas tareas al pensamiento, nuevos recorridos conceptuales a nuestro imaginario crítico. La crítica al uso se dedicó a importar categorías filosóficas para pensar los singulares problemas y la particular dinámica que proponían nuestras literaturas. Aquí se propone un camino contrario: interpelar desde estos nuevos

conceptos a las tradiciones filosóficas dominantes, a las tradiciones de pensamiento al uso. (Brioso, CFP, 2011)

But according to Castro Gómez's evaluation of the problem in 1998, the solution was not to formulate other now post-theoretical matrices (which were fatally condemned to repeat the same or similar metaphysical ties to "theory") rather, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in "playing fair":

Si detrás de la interpretación no hay realidades sino únicamente voluntades, entonces la única estrategia para quebrantar la metafísica es la que Spivak denomina el "Darstellung", esto es, la historización radical del propio locus enuntiationis. (Castro Gómez and Mendieta, 1998: 14)

If we follow Castro-Gómez's reading of Spivak, we might conclude that the Latin American criticism that used these sylabi believed it had resolved the problem of "la resistencia [de la experiencia] a la teoría" by replacing the persecution of the constitutive dream of thought—"la supresión de la distancia entre las palabras y las cosas"—with "la historización radical del propio locus enuntiationis". The problem, in this case, remains unresolved and the thesis of Paul de Man seems even more preferable: in effect, with what class of metaphysical obligations do we associate such concepts as "radical historicization"? What is the "locus enuntiationis" from which such a historicization of such a locus is possible, and what or who guarantees or maintains at least provisionally its preferable position? Since "history" and "historicization" are as much or more colored by Western imperialist metaphysics than any other mystification...what prevents a determined notion of "literature", appropriated solely for the effects that we propose, from taking part in the pursuit of a kind of criticism that is genuinely materialist and emancipatory?

In effect, a variant of resistance to theory that is not just Latin American consists of a certain naturalization of the *historicity* of "practices" that would bring us closer to the concrete, and take us away from the supposed danger of abstraction, a naturalization based on certain reliability case studies (but also of "processes", already rather *abstract*), correlative with the particular mistrust of theoretical generalizations and conceptualization. Two interventions illustrate this point: in June of 2006, Ana Longoni (Universidad de Buenos Aires) wrote that "la *Teoría de la vanguardia* de Peter Bürger funciona como un sobreentendido y restrictivo corset que constriñe las aproximaciones a la *historia concreta* o a la idea misma de vanguardias argentinas" (Longoni, 2006: 61; my emphasis). It is not our purpose to discuss here how correct Longoni was in regards to the limitations or narrowness of Bürger's theory, rather, we are concerned with what is taken for granted: that, in effect, there is something we, unperturbed, can call "concrete history" and that this

---

label would not be a conceptual generalization with risks distinct—but no less controversial—from those of other ontological compromises fatally contracted by means of other concepts and theories. In fact, the explanation that Longoni provides with regard to the limitations of Bürger’s theory rests on his historical determinations: “el punto de vista posterior a los acontecimientos de mayo de 1968” and “el fracaso de los movimientos estudiantiles de los primeros años 70” (2006: 61-62). The second intervention took place in August of 2014, and some remarks made at a conference about “La prensa periódica y los desafíos para la historia de la literatura”, organized in Argentina by the Brazilian Márcia Abreu (Universidade Estadual in Campinas), who is a recognized specialist in the cultural history of reading and of the book. The conference announcement stated that the history of literature “se ha construido en torno de algunas *abstracciones*, entre las que se destacan las ideas de obra, autor y contexto”; it suggested that in the research, “revelando una vasto acervo de materiales no considerados en las historias literarias convencionales, mostrando intereses económicos y políticos *en juego* en el momento de composición de los textos y de producción de los impresos”. Lastly, Abreu anticipated that the conference would present “algunas propuestas sobre cómo producir un abordaje *plenamente histórico* de la literatura” (our emphasis). Again, it is taken for granted that while “work, author, and context” are “abstractions” (what we have called ontological compromises, which are unavoidable when speaking—as philosophy and linguistics have demonstrated), while things like “economic and political interests”, “texts” or “production” are not. The idea, then, that a way exists of “producing a purely historical approach” is, of course, unsustainable. With the best intentions, it might be said that the important thing is the detailed development of the Abreu conference and of many more of his courageous writings, which cannot be compared to the weight attributed to an email that announced an event by means of a brief abstract. But the announcement, written presumably with little circumspection, for that very reason, undoubtedly represents another symptom of this sense of “*concreticista*” resistance to theory in Latin-American criticism.

Undoubtedly as a protest against the so-called agendas of that setting, and from a perspective that is no less radical, yet far removed from the suspicion toward theory, Dardo Scavino noted in his 2004 book about Juan José Saer:

Pensar la poesía significa pensar aquello que da que pensar [...] Cuando la filosofía piensa la palabra poética, está pensando entonces sus propias condiciones de realidad. [...] Que la conjunción de la literatura y la filosofía, o la poesía y el pensamiento, resulte poco frecuente cuando de un escritor latinoamericano se trata, no lo ignoramos. [...] A los escritores latinoamericanos [...] se los suele considerar más aptos a la excursión etnológica, el exotismo social o el turismo político. (Scavino, 2004: 12-13)

---

Other extreme reactions against the post- or deconstructionalist politics that would prefer to ignore theory can be found in the Hispanic context, like the “Prólogo” to *Teoría literaria y literatura comparada*, the collection edited by Jordi Llovet in 2005. In 2009, Noé Jitrik, coordinator of the *Historia crítica de la literatura argentina*—a collaborative work that is still in progress—published a volume of speculative essays united under the title *Verde es toda teoría*; in the act of actualizing a controversial dialogue with the romantic topic crystallized in the phrase by Goethe (“Gris es toda teoría, y verde es el árbol dorado de la vida”) Jitrik replaced and defied one of the most powerful forms of resistance to theory.

Recalling another of the sharpest observations about the problem, we must mention Alberto Giordano, who supposed that it would be worthwhile to discuss the idea, though it might seem reductive:

la “mirada antropológica” que establece la necesidad didáctica de una “posliteratura” no es más que el punto de vista miope, ciego a la heterogeneidad radical de la experiencia estética, en el que se expresan los intereses de un conflicto estrictamente profesional. (Giordano, 2010: 10)

## 2. Resistance to theory in histories of reading

In the introduction to his influential book *La gran matanza de gatos* (1984), Robert Darnton was able to somewhat condense the method of investigation of the new cultural history with this statement: “Cuando no podemos comprender un proverbio, un chiste, un rito o un poema, estamos detrás de la pista de algo importante. Al examinar un documento en sus partes más oscuras, podemos descubrir un extraño sistema de significados” (1994 [1984]: 12). This is strange: Why does Darnton allow us to suppose that, in contrast, there is nothing “important” or “strange” in the fact that we can *understand*—or we think we can understand—a proverb, a joke, a ritual or a poem? Furthermore, why should we accept Darnton’s claim that there are jokes or poems that we can understand? What and how much do we take for granted when we say “we can understand”, when we qualify things we do not understand with “obscure” and those we do understand with “clear” or familiar? Who is the first person that says, “we can understand”, “we can discover”? On the other hand, the readers of literature know, and have known for a long time, that a poem is brought about as it is (it is read as it is read) precisely because of its foreignness, its blurriness or its irreparable displacement with respect to meaning and “systems of meaning”. “Leer, en el sentido de la lectura literaria, ni siquiera es un puro movimiento de comprensión, el conocimiento que mantendría el sentido liberándolo—writes Maurice Blanchot—. Leer se sitúa más allá o más acá de la

---

comprensión” (2004 [1955]: 184). The distance between Blanchot’s conviction—that anticipates the Barthesian divergence between the cultural reader and the reader desubjectified in pleasure—and ideas of understanding and meaning upon which Darnton’s method rests, separates and distributes (in a preliminary and somewhat schematic way, of course) the possibilities of criticism that have taken an interest in the themes of reading and the reader.

The simultaneously historiographical, sociological and ethnographical mode of studying this theme governs the so-called “history of reading” or “of readers”. Here, “reading” and “readers” are “practices” and social subjectivities, facts and customs of cultures that research proposes to discover, describe and analyze in certain primary sources, sometimes called “reception documents”. These research projects link to a tradition that precedes them: the histories of the book and the sociologies of “audience” and of “taste”. It is possible that the most cited authors in this realm of investigation are the Argentine critic Alberto Manguel and, above all, Roger Chartier and Darnton. As José Luis De Diego clarifies in a well-informed and rigorous explanation of the “history of reading” as a new discipline (2013), reading “no debe entenderse en tanto *experiencia* (de acuerdo con una larga tradición que iría de la fenomenología a la estética de la recepción) sino como *práctica* cultural” (De Diego, 2013: 43). This clarification necessarily leads to an anticipation of some precautionary measures, relative to particular resistances to theory offered by three concepts or resistances that the histories of reading would seemingly prefer to minimize or ignore.

Firstly, although De Diego synthesizes the reference by summarily naming the theoretical-critical trends perhaps most recognized and discussed until the end of the twentieth century (“phenomenology”, “reception aesthetics”, words which Eagleton uses in the titles of chapters of his previously cited manual), it is clear that the notion of “experience” and the thesis of the “reader as an *experience*” cannot be confined within this theoretical pathway without leaving behind important and numerous perspectives and philosophical, theoretical and critical contributions. To mention just a few cases—though that of Barthes would suffice—, who would deny that Walter Benjamin is both a theorist of reading and one of the greatest thinkers regarding experience? “Experience” is a key word in the work of Maurice Blanchot, a theorist of the act of “reading”, of the “reader”, and of the “reading”, and perhaps the most anti-phenomenological of the philosophers of literature. In some of his essays, Georges Didi-Huberman proposes not a theory of reading, but a *theory of the reception* of art that emphatically recuperates a definitive place for “experience”. In this respect, what we would call the impatience of rationalist vigilance—with its recurring expectation for coherence—impedes the realization that written thought such as the examples

---

we have mentioned, is not about circling around a prison with two false exits: one that gives to metaphysical phenomenalism of experience (interior, *subjective*) and another that leads to an implacable materialism of determinations (cultural, social). Rather, it would deal with quests that—in the jungle of available philosophical dialects—are able to speak another, one that is always about to be invented: something like a thought about the act of reading as uncalculated contingency and unique emergence in the “between”, in the instant or the minimal point of the hiatus, the break, the trauma of the split condition of subjectivity. Because all literary theory would demonstrate, in bearing witness to the resistance of language and of literature to be theorized, that history, culture, signification always produce a remnant that cannot be understood, seen, named or learned.

Secondly, one of the most controversial weaknesses of these “histories of reading” is precisely the scarce and scanty presence of a theory of subjectivity among its critical tools: as a result it is difficult to find an explanation of the assumptions (philosophic, anthropologic, psychological) upon which rests what they call “the reader” or “readers” and to whom we should attribute the “cultural practice” called “reading”. In this respect, it is somewhat curious that the relationship that these histories of reading maintain with the problem of determinations does not always seem consistent: the *Historia de la lectura en el mundo occidental* overseen by Guglielmo Cavallo y Roger Chartier—according to de Diego “el más valioso y sistemático aporte a la disciplina que nos ocupa” since it was published in 1997—seems, even in its programmatic aspect, little worried about the active, creative and insubordinate role of readers, users or receivers in which Chartier, De Certeau or—previously—Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and others had insisted upon in methodological writings. In effect, in the introduction to the volume, where Cavallo and Chartier outline the topic and the principal theoretical and methodological criteria that guided them, they are not so much the readers as much as “unas normas y unas convenciones de lectura”, who “en cada comunidad de lectores, definen unos usos legítimos del libro, unos modos de leer, unos instrumentos y unos procedimientos de interpretación”; and if it is certain that there is also a place for the “hopes and interests” of the “diverse groups of readers”, this also is reasoned—together with norms and conventions—as “*determinaciones, que gobiernan las prácticas*” (Cavallo and Chartier, 2011 [1997]: 27; our emphasis). Finally, it is very strange that to conceptualize this theory of government of the “practices” based on determining “norms” and “conventions”, Cavallo and Chartier resort to the phrasing “reader world” of the master of hermeneutics Paul Ricoeur and, stranger still that they use the category of “comunidades [institucionales] de interpretación” with which Stanley Fish—a widely recognized figure in “theories of reception”—tried to deal with the problem of

interpretive indetermination in his well-known essay “¿Hay un texto en esta clase?”; we should remember the provocative deterministic seriousness which with Fish tries to dismiss the libertarian risks of the creative, ignorant and distracted reader:

si en vez de actuar por su propia cuenta, los intérpretes actúan como extensiones de una comunidad institucional, el solipsismo y el relativismo [...] no son modos posibles de ser. Es decir, la condición exigida para que alguien sea solipsista o relativista, ser independiente de los supuestos institucionales y tener la libertad de crear unos propósitos y objetivos propios, nunca podría cumplirse. (Fish, 1998: 236)

But this use, seemingly incongruent with terminologies that originated from certain literary theories of the new “histories of reading”, is not so surprising if we remember that Darnton dedicates a chapter of his book from 1984 to the 18<sup>th</sup> century readers of Rousseau, and announces that his essay tries to “combinar la historia tradicional, basada en la investigación de archivos, con la interpretación de textos del tipo desarrollado por los críticos literarios como Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Wayne Booth, Stanley Fish” and others (Darnton, 1994: 216). When we read the concrete case studies and historical contexts that these historians of reading have published, we can confirm the accuracy of De Diego’s definition: the reading *stricto sensu*, that is, all the aspects that are not empirically observable in the act of reading—the *experience* of the reader—are barely dealt with sporadically. If, as Darnton admits, before thoroughly studying the reading of a provincial bourgeois reader from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “la lectura continúa siendo un misterio” (1994: 216), the purpose of these “histories of reading” does not seem to explore this mystery.

Thirdly, and as part of the same line of questioning that produces this way of dealing with subjectivity, these histories of reading do not always give us sufficient references in order to understand what is the tone of the event, action, operation, process (or whatever they are discussing) that—with perseverance—dominates the “practice” of reading, even when sociological theory or ethnography provides many different conceptualizations of “practices” and the practical (Bourdieu, De Certeau, to name but a few); we should not sharpen the gaze so much that we fear such an insistence on the mere word “practices” would become another symptom: the crystallization of a type of talisman that assures a materialist, *concretista* and anti-abstract focus: the performative that recalls and believes it can ward off—in short—the danger of the abstract, metaphysical, subjectivist, or poetic diversion to which, it seems, any displacement would lead towards the philosophical or theoretical question.

### 3. Histories of audiences or readers in fiction

---

Focusing on one particular corpus of studies permits us to observe how the resistance to theories of reading that is included in the “histories of reading” has taken, at times, the form of a substitution: we speak of “readers” and “reading” when, in truth, the interest and descriptions point to what the researchers also call “audience” or “audiences”; specifically, audiences that read, or *print audiences* (in the same way we discuss an *audience of sports or spectacles*).

In Argentine criticism there are three generations of histories of reading that allow us to see the vacillations of this substitution or the alternation between the two different problems that the concepts of audience and reading point to. The first generation is seen in two titles that represent alternative paths to the historicization of audiences, that is, of groups of determined social readers: *El imperio de los sentimientos. Narraciones de circulación periódica en la Argentina (1917-1927)* by Beatriz Sarlo (1985), and *El discurso criollista en la formación de la Argentina moderna* by Adolfo Prieto (1988). Both are studies of literature of diverse content—fictional narratives, mostly—published in the new printed mediums of the so-called publishing market destined for emerging popular or working-class audiences, during the process of cultural modernization in Argentina. Prieto’s book offers almost no signs of contact with the debates about the post “collapse” of Latin-American literary criticism that we noted previously, but was nevertheless crucial within the undeniable inclination of much contemporary Argentine criticism (whether or not this inclination is considered or assessed) towards the possibilities of a sociological and culturalist historicism tied to methods and to the type of sources of historiography (those of historians of political, demographic, economic, social and ideological history).

The second generation is represented by *Testimonios tangibles. Pasión y extinción de la lectura en la narrativa moderna*, by Nora Catelli, and *La dorada garra de la lectura* by Susana Zanetti, published in 2001 and 2002 respectively. These two works soon became obligatory references for another kind of research: the study of the representations of reading, readers and, especially of female readers in narrative enunciations, in related histories, in characters or in spaces and imagined and described habits in novels, stories, and fictions in general.

It is not difficult to observe that, though all the works mentioned fluctuate—through strategy or through methodological necessity—between studying historical reader audiences and analyzing fictional representations of readers, Prieto principally attempted to come to know in a direct way—and not so much through the multilayered and,

at times, oblique way of fiction—something about socio-historical male and female readers susceptible to being named and described socio-demographically.

A third generation could be distinguished, finally, among professional researchers who, following in different ways the paths opened by Sarlo, Prieto, Catelli or Zanetti, were interested in the history of readers and, at the same time, in fictional representations of female readers in doctoral theses or books published during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The most notable case is probably the book by Graciela Batticuore published in 2005, *La mujer romántica. Lectoras, autoras y escritores en la Argentina: 1830-1870*. Also worth noting here is the work of Fabio Espósito, *La emergencia de la novela en Argentina. La prensa, los lectores y la ciudad (1880-1890)*, published in 2009.

Research such as that of Prieto and Sarlo, more so than the others, faced a well-known and often unavoidable methodological difficulty, the same one that histories of subaltern or popular subjectivities confront time and time again: though the greatest proximity with natives that the ethnographer can achieve may be (as C. Geertz demonstrated) extremely problematic, it is an *advantage* that very few historians rely on (for example, those who dedicate themselves to “recent history”); in other words, to know today what women and men from the 1920s read and especially how they read, one should read history against the grain, knowing that we often find little or nothing in these exercises. In this sense, it is possible that the enthusiasm that brought about a book as original as *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) by Richard Hoggart has been exaggerated in a determined sense: to do something like that, up to a certain point one has to be, like Hoggart, a native of the world of working-class readings, the neighborhood conversations and the familiar habits that he studied, among other motivations for the autobiographical circumstances that—he himself points out—intervene decisively in the pages of his book. With respect to these methodological dilemmas, the most notable Argentine case is the book by Sarlo about the melodramas of the “novela semanal”. More notable than Prieto’s work about *criollismo*, that in general limits the reach of his questions, rather than to what a critic can interpret from a reading of fictions and poems printed in melodramas, to what a historian could respond to these writings in contrasting them with documents with registers more similar to the “empíricamente observable” (to use the phrase of Raymond Williams): figures and information about campaigns and alphabetization and schooling, state decisions relative to public libraries and to contents of teaching that entailed civic instruction, linguistic politics and literature; episodes and moments of changes in the history of the book and of the modes of circulation of printed material, decisions of the publishing companies and history of the publishing houses, frequencies and

---

printing of newspapers and of old and new periodical publications, debates and interventions of the era regarding the effects of the new readings in the popular social sectors, etc. The “new reader” that Prieto attempts to describe in his research is, of course, a collective social, historical subject demographically identifiable (and only in a very indirect and remote way, in contrast, an eventual contribution for a historical phenomenology of experience of de-subjectification that certain events of literary reading can provoke).

That is not the case for the works of Catelli and Zanetti. These works of research are familiar with and make use of historical, ethnographical and social analysis tools learned from Bourdieu or Chartier, De Certeau or Darnton, and previously in the classes of Prieto himself or in his books, beginning with *Sociología del público argentino* from 1956. But what, in contrast, characterizes the essays of Catelli and Zanetti is that they are simultaneously directed at the literary knot of the fictions they interrogate—a type of critical work that Prieto demonstrates knowledge of but that does not control his historian’s voice. Summarily, two traits deserve to be highlighted in respect to these two critical works: in the first place, some choices in the writing which simultaneously account for an interest and for a choice of a critical voice; interest in the experience of desubjectification of the fictional or real readers that they study, in their anxieties or their desires, perturbations, or pleasures, their manner of saying things in passion, hunger, and, at the same time, the fear of the effects of the act of reading; and choice of the written voice of the female reader, that which is enunciated in the essay and is permitted to bring forth—between the weaving of the arguments and their preferences for certain texts, among the rigor of the information and the delivery of the prose critical of the affectations of reading—an experience of the uncertainties of the reading which, if it does not expand itself nor overflow, certainly it is insinuated and allowed to be spoken. Secondly, merging with the first trait, the books by Zanetti and Catelli are testimonies—when they cite it but also when they do not—of a theoretical library that goes from Auerbach to Barthes, to Blanchot or Freud, among others; from there a certain theoretical horizon is undoubtedly derived regarding reading as an event, while the inclination to investigate the essay as a form, so that critical writing goes from erudite rigor to written testification of the experience of the female reader who—pushed outside of herself by what is read—writes the essay that we have in our hands.

#### 4. Some hypotheses

Literary theories read as theories of reading—from Bakhtin to Barthes, from Benjamin to Blanchot, from Derrida to Rancière—, along

---

with theorizations implied in Latin-American criticism and essay, allow us to organize a series of initial conjectures that would orient a critical work which is capable of neither forgetting nor repressing the resistance that literature offers to the reading, nor the remnant of indetermination that all occurrences of writing always produce; such orientation—it is important to emphasize this in the light of the critical and pedagogical tendencies between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of this century—seems politically preferable if critical thought wants to be associated to an ethnics of a firm and radical emancipatory slant:

1. Literature, that is, “el libro que se origina en el arte, no tiene garantías en el mundo, y cuando es leído, aún no ha sido leído nunca, sólo alcanza su presencia de obra en el espacio abierto por esa lectura única que cada vez es la primera, que cada vez es la única”, according to the quotation Blanchot cited earlier (2004: 182), and that prefigures the opposition between culture and destruction in *El placer del texto* by Barthes. This hypothesis can be reasoned as a variant or Blanchotian translation of the thesis regarding the “la resistencia [de la literatura] a la lectura” that Paul de Man formulated.

2. The social and cultural reader (meaning an ordinary person subjected to the Language of *all*) claims to bid for the same territory that the literary reader explores (meaning a happening—unique—from the desubjectification—unfastening). There is no way in which the social and cultural reader stops committing that error (that error—to claim that the literary space coincides in some measure with the territory of Culture—is its regular condition). The social and cultural reader is *the Other*, irreducibly other to the literary reader. The literary reader of which we speak is a contingency (not a condition, nor an identity), in the sense that every mortal and his search—though he may return intermittently—is lost. We may create a dialogue between this displacement and the thesis—present in de Man, in Barthes and in others—according to which the only reading, that which always remains, is that which manifests the *other* of Culture: that which culture, considering itself as such, does not give signification, remains outside of itself and thus cannot see. The literary reader is the ignorant one: the one who (consciously or not) ignores culture’s pretension of itself (culture interpellates him tirelessly and he ignores it).

3. All writing (whether it is labeled as literature or not) manifests—in some way among many possible ways—a theory, and a policy or, even better, an ethics, of reading. In all poetic, essayist, critical, theoretical, or philosophical writing (which is to say, in all writing where the drama-trauma of the subjectification-de-subjectification has not vanished) it can be that (whether or not it is formulated) but it is always actualized, it is effectuated—ultimately, it *happens* and it

opens itself up as truth—the resistance to reading (which is to say literature *stricto sensu*).

4. A theory of reading similar to what is considered here could not aspire to a *method* other than what we provisionally call a conjectural phenomenology of reading, perhaps initiating its exploration in an analogy similar to what Philips proposes with psychoanalysis (cited by Serra Bradford in the epigraph above). At a point of intersection like this, perhaps psychoanalysis still has something to say to literary theory as theory of the act of reading. Or perhaps as literary critics we must still learn almost from scratch, to ask ourselves, with such diverse and so many stories of experiences of reading, how often do we work on *analysis* in order to establish which effects are associated with which ideas of the literary?

If not silence, then the *final* thing always said about the act of reading should be: “I do not know” or better, “I not know”. Or, like Beckett: *You must read, I can't read, I will read.*

## Works cited

- AVELLANEDA, A. (2008): "Discursos críticos y discursos sociales: los estudios literarios latinoamericanistas en el contexto de los Estados Unidos", in Bolaños, Á. (ed.), *Literatura, política y sociedad: construcciones de sentido en la Hispanoamérica contemporánea*, Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 201-210.
- BARTHES, R. (1985): *El placer de texto and Lección inaugural*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- BATTICUORE, G. (2005): *La mujer romántica. Lectoras, autoras y escritores en la Argentina: 1830-1870*, Buenos Aires: Edhasa.
- BEVERLEY, J. (1993): *Against Literature*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- BLANCHOT, M. (2004 [1955]): "Leer", in *El espacio literario*, Barcelona: Paidós, 179-185.
- BRIOSO, Jorge (2011): CFP, in <<http://spanish.colorado.edu/General/colorado-review.html>>, [07/01/2011].
- CASTRO-GÓMEZ, S. and MENDIETA, E. (eds.) (1998): *Teorías sin disciplina (latinoamericanismo, poscolonialidad y globalización en debate)*, México: Miguel Ángel Porrúa ed., <<http://www.ceapedi.com.ar/imagenes/biblioteca/libros/148.pdf>> [12/03/2014].
- CATELLI, N. (2001): *Testimonios tangibles. Pasión y extinción de la lectura en la narrativa moderna*, Barcelona, Anagrama.
- CAVALLO, G. and CHARTIER, R. (2011 [1997]): *Historia de la lectura en el mundo occidental*, Buenos Aires: Taurus.
- CEVASCO, M. E. (2003 [2001]): *Para leer a Raymond Williams*. Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes.
- COMITÉ CIENTÍFICO, Centro de Estudios de Teoría y Crítica Literaria, Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (IdIHCS), UNLP, (2014): "Primera circular" IX Congreso Internacional Orbis Tertius de Teoría y Crítica Literaria, La Plata: UNLP, <<http://www.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/idihcs/cetcl/eventos/evento.2014-07-02.8171547389>>, [11/23/2014].
- DARNTON, R. (1994 [1984]): *La gran matanza de gatos y otros episodios en la historia de la cultura francesa*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- DE DIEGO, J. L. (2013): "Lecturas de historias de la lectura", *Orbis Tertius. Revista de teoría y crítica literaria*, XVII (19), 42-58, <<http://www.orbistertius.unlp.edu.ar>>, [11/07/2014].
- DE MAN, P. (1990): "La resistencia a la teoría", in *La resistencia a la teoría*. Madrid: Visor, 11-37.
- DE MAN, P. (2002 [1986]): "The Resistance to Theory", in *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 3-19.
- EAGLETON, T. (2008 [1983]): *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- EAGLETON, T. (1988): *Una introducción a la teoría literaria*, México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- ESPÓSITO, F. (2009): *La emergencia de la novela en Argentina. La prensa, los lectores y la ciudad (1880-1890)*, La Plata: Editorial de la Universidad de La Plata.
- FISH, S. (1998): "¿Hay un texto en esta clase?", in Palti, E. (ed.), *Giro lingüístico e historia intelectual*, Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 217-236.
- FRANCO, J. (2002): *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City. Latin America in the Cold War*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- GIORDANO, A. (2010): "Introducción", in Giordano, A. (ed.), *Los límites de la literatura*. Rosario: Centro de Estudios de Literatura Argentina, UNR.
- HOGGART, R. (1957): *The Uses of Literacy. Aspects of Working Class Life with Special References to Publications and Entertainments*, London: Chatto & Windus.
- JITRIK, N. (2009): *Verde es toda teoría*, Buenos Aires: Liber.
- LASARTE VALCARCEL, J. (2006): "El bebé y el agua de la bañera o ¿aún contra la literatura? (in/comodidades de las nuevas agendas)", *Orbis Tertius. Revista de teoría y crítica literaria*, 11(12), <<http://www.orbistertius.unlp.edu.ar/>>, [11/04/2014].
- LECUNA, V. (2001): "Desorientaciones intelectuales", in Lasarte Valcárcel, J. (ed.), *Territorios intelectuales. Pensamiento y Cultura en América Latina*, Caracas: Fondo Editorial La Nave Va, 102-113.

- LLOVET, J. (ed.) (2007): *Teoría literaria y literatura comparada*, Ariel: Barcelona, 2nd edition.
- LONGONI, A. (2006): "La teoría de la vanguardia como corset", *Pensamiento de los confines*, 18, June, 61-68.
- LUDMER, J. (2010), *Aquí América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia.
- MIGNOLO, W. (1997): "La revolución teórica del Zapatismo: sus consecuencias históricas, éticas y políticas", *Orbis Tertius. Revista de teoría y crítica literaria*, vol. 2, num. 5, <<http://www.orbistertius.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/OTv02n05a06/3990>>, [11/07/2014].
- ORTEGA, J. (2003): "Post-teoría y estudios transatlánticos", *Iberoamericana. América Latina – España – Portugal*, III, num. 9, March, 109-117.
- PRIETO, A. (1956): *Sociología del público argentino*, Buenos Aires: Leviatán.
- PRIETO, A. (1988): *El discurso criollista en la formación de la Argentina moderna*, Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.
- RAMA, Á. (1984): *La ciudad letrada*, Hanover: Ediciones del Norte.
- RANCIÈRE, J. (1998): *La parole muette. Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature*, Paris: Hachette [*La palabra muda*, Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2009].
- RANCIÈRE, J. (2007): *Politique de la littérature*, Paris: Galilée. [*Política de la literatura*, Buenos Aires: Del Zorzal, 2011]
- SARLO, B. (1985): *El imperio de los sentimientos. Narraciones de circulación periódica en la Argentina (1917-1927)*, Buenos Aires: Catálogos.
- SCAVINO, D. (2004): *Saer y los nombres*, Buenos Aires: El cielo por asalto ed.
- SERRA BRADFORD, M. (2014): "Tres ensayistas curiosos", *Revista Crítica*, April, <<http://revistacritica.com/contenidos-impresos/ensayo-literario/tres-ensayistas-curiosos-por-matias-serra-bradford>>, [12/10/2014].
- SPIVAK, G. C. (2011 [1984]): *¿Puede hablar el sujeto subalterno?*, Buenos Aires: El cuenco de plata.
- ZANETTI, Susana (2002): *La dorada garra de la lectura. Lectoras y lectores de novela en América Latina*, Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo.